

America's struggles over education, postal service offer lessons for Canada

Foreign elections, no matter how chaotic, can sometimes be illuminating

by Conrad Black



The titanic electoral struggle in the United States has spread into the state school systems and postal service, as the battle for control of the vast apparatus of American government between President Donald Trump and his enemies reaches a supreme climax. We are more than 10 weeks away from election day, and I will only comment here on some aspects relevant to public policy in this country. The United States and Canada have parallel difficulties with education standards in public schools, and with the cost of their university

systems and their effectiveness in assuring future employment. And as internet messaging and courier services steal more and more traditional postal customers, the question of how to manage postal services becomes more complicated. The coronavirus pandemic and the sudden and unusually prolonged flareup of American urban violence have become the commanding heights of the immense American political battlefield.

The consequences of these and related struggles in the United States are important to Canada, although the sources of these controversies have no application here. From the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic the Democrats have seen their chances of electoral victory come to depend on a prolonged economic shutdown and massive job layoffs, in order to exploit voter discontent and portray Trump as effectively the Herbert Hoover of the 21st century. The national political media have effectively been Trump's real campaign opponent since the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, rarely departs his basement. The media have carried the ball and have applied their considerable energies to terrorizing the public about the virus and exaggerating its danger to all sections of the population (it is highly lethal among the elderly, but less dangerous to non-seniors).

The teachers' unions, long joined-at-the-hip allies of the Democratic party, have solemnly announced that they will not return to the classroom until the virus has subsided completely (by which they mean the day after the election if Biden wins). Since elementary school students are in almost no danger of a fatal affliction, and it is believed that children do not transmit the virus as easily to adults, and the great majority of teachers do not have diminished immune systems and are not above the age of 60, with elemental precautions there is minimal danger of serious problems. The president says that those states that do not at least partially return to in-person schooling will become ineligible for federal education assistance, which will instead be directed to private, charter

or separate schools, or even neighbourhood home-schooling.

It is one of the great ironies of modern times in all advanced Western countries that we invest more and more every year in our public education systems, to receive what all objective testing indicates are less and less knowledgeable graduates. Two years ago, the principal teachers' union in Ontario greeted this result with the suggestion that the annual tests of matriculating students' level of familiarity with the curriculum be ended. The U.S. Republican party, President Trump himself and Education Secretary Betsy DeVos have all said throughout the last four years that they would make unprecedented efforts to reverse the decline in educational standards in the United States, which they hold to be uncompetitive with other advanced countries. Conditions may not be so dire in Canada, but it is notorious that education standards have declined and addressing this problem is invariably obstructed by teachers' unions. This is why schools that are better workplace environments, such as private schools and even, up to a point, separate schools, have generally better results.

If the Trump administration is re-elected, it's already well-initiated drive to emphasize schools that will produce more internationally competitive graduates will be reinforced and accelerated. While teachers' unions in the U.S. naturally claim that their only interest is the education and safety of the students, public impatience with their avarice and widespread incompetence has severely damaged their credibility. In the United States, as in Canada and other countries, parents are concerned about this trend, and irritated as taxpayers.

I have written here before that I think that many of our schools are little better than daycare centres for the slender amount of learning they impart, and apparently, that condition is even worse in many American school districts. To be fair, it is undoubtedly more difficult to educate children who are

so thoroughly distracted by modern technological devices that do a great deal of deduction and composition, and almost all physical writing and calculation, for them. But in the end, there is no greater contributor to the competitive status of any country and therefore to its ability to prosper and flourish than the quality of its education. Leaving out all the many other issues that have arisen during this election in the United States, this is a policy conflict that could give Canada and other countries a good deal of guidance in the practicality and benefit of imposing drastic reforms in our school systems.

At the same time, the Trump administration has become so exasperated with the cost, slothfulness and often highly anti-American slant of university education, that it is slowly turning the fiscal screws to require post-secondary schools to achieve greater standards of efficiency and higher standards of diversity of intellectual, sociological and political perspectives. There is no suggestion of dictating curriculum, but there is clearly a powerful and vocal ambition to require that universities, as was for centuries their *raison d'être*, expose students neutrally to a variety of viewpoints, instead of hatred of every aspect of American life and history: sausage factories of unpatriotic bigotry and narrow-mindedness.

The U.S. Post Office is being dragged into this election because of the Democrats' desire to promote mail-in votes, in which everyone on the state's register would be sent a ballot, and voters would be invited to mail back their ballots. Many of those states have no history of conducting free and fair elections by mail, potentially leaving them prone to error and fraud, and the accuracy of their voter registration lists can vary wildly. There's also the issue of huge numbers of ballots getting into the hands of political organizations that return substantial numbers of fraudulent ballots in their own interest. In addition to this mutation of the process, which

is called ballot-harvesting, the post office is in no condition to deal with the requirement to mail out and promptly manage the return of up to 100 million votes. Apart from assuring the absence of a monstrous fraud at the polls, the administration is in fact trying to improve the efficiency of the postal service. If it succeeds, that could give Canada and other countries useful information about how to deal with the deterioration of our own postal services.

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